



The great debate debate

Description

The [European Commission](#) is hosting debates around Europe at the moment: *Citizens' Dialogues*, in the style of town-hall debates, are taking place across the EU. Feel free to come along *if it's your first come, first served!* • Dialogue is good, but is debate always the best model for promoting public engagement?

When I was in primary school I was put into a class debating team to argue the motion: *It is better to live in the country than in the city*. On another occasion it was about animals: *Animals should not be kept in zoos*.

You would write your argument as homework and then read it out in front of the class. You didn't have to have an actual opinion, but were assigned an opinion, and had to present the case to support it as persuasively as you could. It's a good skill to learn, especially when you are defending a position you don't believe in. You get to scrutinise both sides of a two-sided argument.

Later on I discovered this was what barristers do. Irrespective of whether they really believe the defendant it's up to the advocate to deliver the best (truthful) evidence and argument they can in the defendant's favour. Then the judge and jury make a decision.

Persuasion

A [YouGov](#) survey of voter attitudes in 2014 indicated that voters want fewer lawyers and reporters as politicians, and more doctors, scientists and factory workers. The number of Westminster MPs who are barristers, solicitors, journalists and publishers is apparently around 16%. The report raises the question of who people trust the most. There's an issue here of the way professions present to the public, and there are some whose public face trades in the adversarial, combative, and sometimes overstated. Their mode of practice is *persuasion*.

I've never been a good debater, hampered by an inability to hide the fact that I don't believe what I'm saying if I don't.

Debating involves a particular style of communication between interlocutors. It often includes pushing arguments to extremes and undermining the opponent's credibility. To debate differs from other modes of performance such as lecturing, raising a question, acting, reciting, discussing and conversing.

Warnings against the techniques used by debaters such as persuasive speech, rhetoric and sophistry date back at least to Plato.

I've heard many debates about the in-out EU referendum over the past few weeks. I wonder if debate is the best model for airing issues. Its convenient binary structure fits a combative format, and can clarify and entertain. But it forces people into polarised positions, to simplify, and it rarely leaves space for pauses, careful consideration, questioning and subtle shifts, at least there and then amongst the combatants.

Another early educational experience, this time as an undergraduate while observing an argument between two students the lecturer remarked: "They seem to be intransigent now in the heat of the debate, but when they talk with each other and their friends tomorrow they will have changed their position in light of what happened today."



I know it sounds less vigorous and too familiar as a format, but conversation is really the norm, and the idea of debate is a sideshow. Not least, conversations linger and persist over time.

I've quoted it before, but it's worth repeating what one European philosopher said about conversation. According to Hans-Georg Gadamer: "A fundamental conversation is never one that we want to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way in which one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own turnings and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the people conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led." (345).

The future

The Design Research Society is hosting a [conference](#) at the Brighton Pavilion this coming week on Future-Focussed Thinking. It begins with a "Keynote Debate" to which I've been asked to contribute: "The Conference Chairs have curated three topics for these invited resolutions: (Speculative) Futures in Design Research, (Sustainable) Design Research for Change, Design Research in (the Tech) Industry. Each Debate will involve 3 participants, speaking for and against 3 distinct propositions." so no pressure.

Reference

- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 2004. *Truth and Method*. Trans. J. Weinsheimer, and D. G. Marshall. New York: Continuum. Second, revised edition. Originally published in German in 1960.

Category

1. Society

Tags

1. conversation
2. debate
3. hermeneutics

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